

**The Media and Its Negative Impact on the War  
in Iraq**

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Whose job is it to scrutinize the government to ensure that the government's decisions on the war reflect the wants and needs of its people? The U.S. government is accountable to the people whom it serves, but accountability has been an issue of a huge debate in today's war in Iraq. Many people will argue that the members of the press should be the advocates of the American people because their jobs require them to search for answers to the many questions that average citizens do not have the time or the access to query the government about. Additionally, the First Amendment allows the media to write and present information without interference from the government. Unfortunately, the concern then becomes a media organization that is without bounds in its reporting of the war in Iraq and the adverse effects on national security. More responsibly in reporting military operations in Iraq is necessary. Because the media acts irresponsibly in reporting military operations, exposing vulnerabilities and emboldening the insurgents, the U.S. must force it to adhere to a strict code of professional ethics and must enlarge the embedded reporting program.

#### **BACKGROUND**

America conducts itself as an open society and operates according to its constitution. With this republican form of democratic government, elected officials run the country and are accountable to the people. The average American does not have the time or the resources to validate every government action

leaving a gap the media is only too happy to fill. The stories chosen by the media, however, shape public opinion and sometimes cause dissension among the American public with respect to the actions of its representative elected government. James Webb writes:

... if a bias or a misperception is collectively shared in the media, then the forum will by its very nature be skewed. The best that can be said in such a situation is that it creates advocacy journalism under the guise of reporting. At its worst, it can result in misleading reporting that affects public morale and wrongly shapes controversial issues.<sup>1</sup>

Unbalanced news (usually negative) presented by the media on the Iraq war can shape public opinion about the administration that serves the people. Currently that public opinion about the war is divided, and heated arguments and protests continue to be commonplace. This internal strife is displayed publicly for the world to see, therefore, creating vulnerabilities for enemies to take advantage of. When the enemy does decide to act, America's military members usually pay the price. Webb writes, "To be blunt, the U.S. military consciously pays a price so that our society's desire for openness can be honored. The questions are how high that price should be, and whether society itself does not lose when the military's good graces are abused by reporters who either do not understand the military or do not have its well-being as a paramount concern in their reporting."<sup>2</sup>

## **CURRENT REPORTING EXPOSES VULNERABILITIES**

Accountability in reporting is crucial. Both the Gulf war and the current war in Iraq have provided examples of irresponsible reporting. As recounted in It Doesn't Take A Hero:

General Schwartzkopf watched in amazement, a live report on a major artillery duel between the 82nd Airborne Division and Iraqi troops. Since this coverage was real-time, and the reporter gave the name of the unit involved, Iraqi intelligence could communicate with their artillery units and ascertain the location of the 82nd Airborne Division. At the time, the 82nd was in a flanking position just prior to the commencement of the Coalition ground offensive.<sup>3</sup>

America is not the sole viewer of news media today, and real-time reporting places military and citizens alike in danger to those who want to expose vulnerabilities. "The essence of successful warfare" writes author Susan Carruthers, "is secrecy; the essence of successful journalism is publicity." In military eyes, journalists' overweening desire for a 'scoop' at any price makes them prone to spilling operational secrets with scant regard to military casualties which might ensue from their careless talk."<sup>4</sup> No commander wants to lose any of his troops because of a lack of secrecy on the media's part.

## **CURRENT REPORTING EMBOLDENS THE INSURGENTS**

Many styles of reporting are effective in getting accurate information to the American public. Current reporting, however, uses American service member body counts as the report card for measuring success or failure in Iraq:

As of Sunday, Dec. 16, 2007, at least 3,893 members of the U.S. military have died since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count. The figure includes eight military civilians. At least 3,168 died as a result of hostile action, according to the military's numbers.<sup>5</sup>

Many times this style of reporting undermines the continued progress of U.S. troops and strengthens the insurgent resolve. Death should not be the deciding factor as to whether a military is winning or losing a war. Thomas Sowell agrees:

The media have made a big production about the cumulative fatalities in Iraq, hyping the thousandth death with multiple full-page features in the *New York Times* and...on TV. The two-thousandth death was similarly anticipated almost impatiently in the media and then made another big splash. But does media hype make 2,000 wartime fatalities in more than two ears unusual? The Marines lost more than 5,000 men taking one island in the Pacific during a three-moth period in World War II. In the Civil War, the Confederates lost 5,000 men in one battle in one day... Neither our troops nor the terrorists are in Iraq just to be killed. Both have objectives. But any objectives we achieve get short shift in mainstream media, if mentioned at all. Our troops can kill 10 times as many of he enemy as they kill and it just isn't news worth featuring, if it is mentioned at all, in much of the media<sup>6</sup>

The body counts form of reported by the media may have other effects not readily apparent to the American people. For example, enemy without many resources or money might draw out the length of this war as long as possible. He may spread suicide bombings out over the span of months instead of weeks. He may detonate IEDs at a much slower rate than before but try to kill more Americans when detonated. In fact, the enemy may film attacks and play them through media channels for the American public to see. Enemies may use the video footage of the American people arguing with each other as a recruitment tool to enlist insurgents for the cause.

#### **STRICT CODE OF ETHICS**

Many professionals in America's society must adhere to a strict code of ethics. The American Society for Civil Engineers for example has the following code of ethics:

##### **Fundamental Principles**

Engineers uphold and advance the integrity, honor and dignity of the engineering profession by:

1. using their knowledge and skill for the enhancement of human welfare and the environment;
2. being honest and impartial and serving with fidelity the public, their employers and clients;
3. striving to increase the competence and prestige of the engineering profession; and
4. supporting the professional and technical societies of their disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

The media needs to have a nationally recognized code of ethics to guide day-to-day goals to report timely and accurate

information. The media scrutinizes the military operations, but those in the military are held to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and all of the Articles herein. The media, at minimum, should have a standard code of their own, not necessarily as stringent as the UCMJ but at minimum a code like that of other American professionals. In the absence of a code, no representative agency currently holds the media accountable for its actions and.

#### **ENLARGE THE EMBEDDED REPORTING PROGRAM**

"The use of the media to provide wartime coverage lends credence to the legitimacy of the ongoing war. It gives the public a sense that the government is relevant and open as a democracy should be."<sup>8</sup> Embedding media with the troops in Iraq provides real-time coverage but in a controlled environment. When the reporters must live with the troops that they are reporting on, a true picture generally is portrayed. Douglas Porch writes the following:

The advent of "operations other than war" and journalists' objections to the pool system revived the concept of "embedded media," an approach first used in World War II and Vietnam, applied in Haiti in 1994, and expanded for the Bosnia intervention the next year. In this arrangement, a reporter is assigned a unit, deploys with it, and lives with it throughout a lengthy period of operations. All in uniform are considered spokespersons for the military and for their missions. However, interviewers must nevertheless respect soldiers' privacy, as well as operational security. Rules also prohibit reporting on intelligence collection, special operations, or casualties. "Embedding" reporters in units has much to offer both sides. These reporters, who usually bond with their units, are likely to appreciate the



difficulties of the mission and tend to file favorable reports.<sup>9</sup>

As one can see, embedded reporting is a fair system for the military and media alike and needs to be expanded. The war in Iraq can be won, but division within the United States will make doing so much more difficult. In the end if the media and the military do not reconcile the differences and show a unified America, the ones who will continue to hurt may be the young service members caught in the middle of two big organizations, while some reporters have also rebelled against the idea of embedding, because they feel that it compromises their ability to be objective.

#### **COUNTER ARGUMENT**

Many argue that nothing should infringe upon the freedom of speech of American citizens and the media. The main reason the American public continues to support its media, even with its' faults, is because exploitation by the media has benefited the country occasionally. Take, for example, Walter Reed Army hospital

Behind the door of Army Spec. Jeremy Duncan's room, part of the wall is torn and hangs in the air, weighted down with black mold. When the wounded combat engineer stands in his shower and looks up, he can see the bathtub on the floor above through a rotted hole. The entire building, constructed between the world wars, often smells like greasy carry-out. Signs of neglect are everywhere: mouse droppings, belly-up cockroaches, stained carpets, cheap mattresses.<sup>10</sup>

No one other than the news media could have had the power to affect change in a VA facility that was this substandard. As a result of the adverse media coverage, the facility received a visit from the President of the United States who made a public

promise to fix it.

### **CONCLUSION**

The system used to report military operations in Iraq is not perfect, however, positive change can be made in the areas of safety, fidelity, and accountability. Military members who fight the in Iraq are expected to conduct themselves according to the UCMJ, and they serve the people of the United States. The media is no different in that regard; the biggest difference being the military is part of the Federal Government and the media is a business. The media and military can and should forge a bond work through embedded reporting. Embedded reporting, already taking place, should continue and grow.

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<sup>1</sup> James H Webb Jr., "The Military and the Media" *Marine Corps Gazette*, Quantico: Nov 1984. Vol. 68, Iss. 11, p. 30-37

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 30-37

<sup>3</sup> Schwartzkopf, General H. Norman, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*. Bantam Books: New York, 1992, p. 510.

<sup>4</sup> Carruthers, Susan L., *The Media At War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pg. 6

<sup>5</sup> Associated Press, "U.S. Military Deaths in Iraq at 3,893" *New York Times*, December 16, 2007,

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Sowell, "Media's ignorance of history enables any war to be depicted as disaster" *The Enterprise*, December 19-25 2005 page 27

<sup>7</sup> In April 1975, the ASCE Board of Direction adopted the fundamental principles of the Code of Ethics of Engineers as accepted by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET)  
Website Address: <http://www.asce.org/inside/codeofethics.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> Carruthers, Susan L., *The Media At War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pg. 6

<sup>9</sup> Barry E. Willey [Col., USA], "The Military-Media Connection: For Better or Worse," *Military Review*, February 1999, pp. 4-5, quoted in Douglas Porch, *Bad Stories* (Naval War College Review: Winter 2002), Vol. LV, No. 1

<sup>10</sup> Diana Priest and Anne Hull, "Soldiers Face Neglect, Frustration At Army's Top Medical Facility", *Washington Post*, February 18, 2007; Page A01

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